

What turnout can we expect in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales?

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*The whole UK will go to the polls on Thursday, with some of the most high profile contests involving the elections of devolved legislatures in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. Here, **Dr. Kenneth Bunker** of the Democratic Dashboard looks at what we might expect turnout to be in the Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales elections in May.*



With the devolved legislatures of Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales all holding elections on the 5th May, each country faces different prospects, given their own particular electoral regimes, party systems, and internal current affairs. In addition to questions of who wins and loses, participation is an important issue in itself. How many people will vote? In all three countries turnout has been on the downfall, decreasing between 5 and 15 percent between the first elections in the late nineties and the most recent one in 2011. Academic literature shows that turnout has an effect on electoral results. If more or less people vote, one or more parties could be benefit, to the detriment of others. In this article I examine trends and speculate on what turnout will look like in each country come 5th May.

Turnout in the United Kingdom

Before fully delving into turnout in Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, it is important to define precisely what we are talking about. Turnout is defined as the percentage of eligible voters who cast a ballot in an election. In the UK, this means citizens of 18 years of age or older living within the territory (16 or over for Scottish Parliamentary elections). Turnout in the United Kingdom is low in an international context, especially in comparison to countries in which eligible voters are mechanically merged into the electoral roll and face penalties if they do not vote (automatic registration and compulsory voting). Turnout for Westminster elections has varied over time. Between 1945 and 1997, it never fell below 70%. However, in the four most recent elections (2001, 2005, 2010, 2015), it has averaged 63%. Of these four elections, the lowest was in 2001 (59.4%), and the highest was in 2015 (66.1%). It is noteworthy, however, to mention that after a slump in the early 2000s, turnout has steadily been increasing.

If we disaggregate these statistics into the countries that will hold devolved elections in 2016, a pattern emerges. Table 1 shows that of the past four Westminster elections (held every four or five years), Wales is the country with highest turnout, with an average of 63.7%. It is closely followed by Scotland, with an average turnout of 63.5%, and Northern Ireland with an average turnout of 61.7%. The lowest turnout in the Table is in the UK in 2001, for Tony Blair's first re-election, suggesting that in less competitive elections, fewer people vote. In contrast, the highest turnout is Scotland in 2015, in the midst of its bid for independence, suggesting that when elections are marked by a distinctive political juncture, more people vote.

Table 1. Westminster Elections, 2001-2015

Year	United Kingdom	Northern Ireland	Scotland	Wales
2015	66.1	58.1	71.1	65.7
2010	65.1	57.6	63.8	64.7
2005	61.4	62.9	60.8	62.6
2001	59.4	68.0	58.2	61.6
Average	63.0	61.7	63.5	63.7

Turnout in Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales

In contrast to turnout rates in Westminster elections, turnout rates in the devolved elections of Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales are significantly lower. This comparatively lower turnout can be largely explained by the reasons outlined above. Naturally, elections in devolved legislatures tend to be less competitive and less prone to be marked by distinctive junctures than nation-wide elections. Indeed, low turnout rates seem to hold over time in these countries, partially because of the stability of partisan domination patterns. The DUP, the UUP, and Sinn Féin dominate elections in Northern Ireland; Labour systematically wins in Wales; and the SNP has established a hegemony of votes and seats in Scotland.

Table 2 shows that turnout in Northern Ireland has been steadily decreasing. It has fallen around 15% between the first election (1998) and the most recent one (2011). Of the three countries, it has been the one with highest turnout, but sharpest decline. Table 2 and Figure 2 also show that turnout in Scotland has also fallen, but at a more stable rate. It has fallen 9% between the first election (1999) and the most recent one (2011). In the past three elections it has averaged 50% turnout. Turnout in Wales has also been steadily decreasing, falling 4% between the first and most recent elections. Of the three countries, it has been the one with lowest turnout, but also the one with the slowest rate of decline.

Table 2. Devolved Elections, 1998-2011*

Year	Northern Ireland	Scotland	Wales
2011	54.7	50.4	42.2
2007	62.3	51.7	43.7
2003	63.1	49.4	38.2
1999	69.9	59.1	46.0
Average	62.5	52.6	42.6

* Northern Ireland held its first elections in 1998, compared to 1999 in Scotland and Wales

What does this mean?

An interesting pattern emerges when comparing turnout rates at the country-level between Westminster elections and devolved elections. The countries that have high turnouts in Westminster elections have low turnouts in devolved elections. While in Westminster elections Northern Ireland is the country with the lowest turnout, in devolved elections it is the country with the highest turnout. Similarly, in Westminster elections Wales is the country with the highest turnout, whereas in devolved elections it is the country with the lowest turnout. In both types of election, Scotland is mid-ranked in average turnout, but it is also the one with the most extreme values. This is particularly visible in the most recent Westminster election, where it had the highest historical turnout (71.1%).

The patterns visible in Westminster elections and devolved elections are different. They respond to different phenomena; the former are arguably more competitive and jam-packed with political junctures. In terms of anticipating turnout rates of the upcoming devolved elections, it is more useful to use the turnout rates of previous

devolved elections than Westminster elections as proxies. However, it is not entirely possible to ignore the state of the current competition and the possibility of emergence of new distinct critical junctures. This information, often provided by public opinion polls, can complement any picture of turnout. Historical trends can be used as a trustworthy baseline as long as they are updated by polls.

What will happen in May?

In line with the above, the data suggests that Scotland will be the country with highest turnout in the next election. Not only has it been stable over the past three elections, but it has also gained national and international attention, given the efforts related to its prospective independence. Northern Ireland will slip into second place in turnout rates. The competition between the DUP and Sinn Féin to secure the first place will likely bring turnout to around 50%. It follows that Wales will be the country with the lowest turnout of the three. Even though it has the highest turnout in Westminster elections, in devolved elections it faces no junctures or competition – in every scenario polls point to a landslide victory in favour of the Labour Party.

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This post represents the views of the author, who writes in a personal capacity, and not those of Democratic Audit UK or the LSE.

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